# The English Leaflet

THE ENGLISH LEAFLET is published at Boston, by the New England Association of Teachers of English. Subscription price, One Dollar. Sec'y-Treas., A. B. DeMille, Winthrop Highlands, Mass. Editor, Charles Swain Thomas, Lawrence Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Vol. XXII DECEMBER, 1923 Number 199

## A REPORT ON INVESTIGATIONS CONDUCTED AT UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, CONCERNING SPEED AND COMPREHENSION IN SILENT READING

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I

Up to this year the course in freshman English at the University of New Hampshire has been a combination of composition work and the reading, outside of class, of standard books. This outside reading has had two chief objects:

(1) To give the students background and so indirectly aid them in their composition.

(2) To provide what we hoped would be a pleasant relief from the tedium of the more formal work in composition and form. Included in the required list were such books as: *The Three Musketeers,* Macaulay's *Essays, Pride and Prejudice,* and *Richard III,* covering the fields of fiction, essay-writing, and the drama.

But the "pleasant relief" in many cases proved to be, on the contrary, an irksome task. The announcement of a book to be read was greeted with a polite, but cold silence; examinations on the content proved very disappointing; we were at our wits' end. A careful study of the problem led us to these conclusions:

(1) We are giving the students the wrong books to read, or

(2) They don't know how to read.

On the first point it is fatally easy to wax eloquent. So many educators have assumed that the fault lies not with the students but with the pabulum offered them. "Let us change the diet," they say. "We won't forswear English, but we shall *abandon Literature.* Instead of the *Spectator,* give

them the *Literary Digest;* instead of Hardy, let them read Oppenheim; the stories in the *Saturday Evening Post* are clever and have a human appeal; substitute *that* for the *Atlantic Monthly.*"

But we were not willing to sell our birthright for a mess of pottage; therefore, we blithely disregarded the first point and gave our careful consideration to the second. "They don't know how to read." And again I am seized with a desire to talk at length, for college students have *not* read, though they have passed their eyes over many printed pages. What is a book to them? An adventure? Rarely. When will they learn what Anatole France has put so well, "A book is a work of magic whence escape all kinds of images to trouble the soul, and change the hearts of men!"

Some one has painstakingly made a list of the books which the college student has not read. It is a long and comprehensive list, beginning with the *Bible* and ending with *Gulliver's Travels.* Nor would it be difficult to make other lists, equally long, equally correct yet entirely different. Suffice it to say that the college student has *not* read.

The next logical step was a decision to find out just how serious the situation was by giving a silent reading test. I think we had in the back of our minds at this time three questions:

(1) What is the speed of each student?

(2) Should we make concessions to the slow readers—perhaps require less reading?

(3) What can we do to remedy matters?

At that time we had no idea of working on anything but the speed factor; the interest in the correlation between speed and comprehension came later.

## II

### THE TEST

The selection which we chose for the test was from the 15th chapter of Kenilworth (the story of Queen Elizabeth and Sir Walter Raleigh) and consisted of 4446 words. There was no particular reason for choosing Kenilworth except that it was easy reading. In order to determine a reasonable time limit we tested four members of the faculty; three were members of the English department; the fourth, a chemist. It is interesting to note here that the variation in time for

these faculty tests was very wide, ranging from ten to twenty minutes. It is even more interesting to know that the chemist scored the highest—just under ten minutes. Judging on this basis, we decided that half-an-hour was ample time for the slowest readers and set that as the maximum time. We marked the time at intervals of five seconds; that is, for a half-hour there would be 1800 intervals. For instance: If a student read 4446 words in ten minutes (or 600 seconds) his rate would be 7.410 words per second; the next by finishing five seconds later would have a score of 7.351 words per second. We found it easier to work out these results by logarithms.

Our next step was to purchase cards 6 x 9, of rather heavy cardboard. For this work we enlisted the co-operation and assistance of the Drawing department. On one side of the card were printed the speed rates, carried to four places, for each five second interval; on the other side was the corresponding time. The cards were arranged carefully, with the highest scores on top.

By this time we had become interested in testing for comprehension also, and had prepared an examination, which consisted of forty statements, concerning the text which they had read, arranged in ten groups of four questions each. Of the four statements in each group, one was correct.

These statements, with the blank side of the paper up, were given to the students on entering the room. At a given signal all began to read. At the end of ten minutes, the instructor began holding up cards at intervals of five seconds. (A stop-watch is necessary for this.) As each student finished reading, he closed his book, turned over his examination paper and copied at the top the number which was then in the air, thus automatically scoring his reading speed. Next he proceeded to check the correct statement in each of the ten groups.

To arrive at some means of expressing in a single figure a student's score in both speed and comprehension, the following plan was adopted. The speed rates were assigned arbitrary values as follows:

| Elapsed time in minutes | Assigned values |
|---|---|
| 30 minutes or more | 0 |
| 28-30 " " " | 1 |
| 26-28 " " " | 2 |
| 26-24 " " " | 3 |
| 24-22 " " " | 4 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22-20 | " | " | " | 5 |
| 20-18 | " | " | " | 6 |
| 18-16 | " | " | " | 7 |
| 16-14 | " | " | " | 8 |
| 14-12 | " | " | " | 9 |
| 0-12 | " | " | " | 10 |

Likewise comprehension scores were assigned the following values:

| Number statements checked | Values |
|---|---|
| 1 | 1 |
| 2 | 2 |
| 3 | 3 |
| 4 | 4 |
| 5 | 5 |
| 6 | 6 |
| 7 | 7 |
| 8 | 8 |
| 9 | 9 |
| 10 | 10 |

By this scheme a student who finished the reading so that he got a score in speed of 5, and a comprehension score of 8, was given a combined score of 13.

We also estimated the ranking for the delegations from the various high schools, both in state and out, as follows: The medians for both speed and comprehension were calculated for each high-school delegation and the arbitrary values were assigned to these medians and added.

For example: The median for the speed rates of the Portsmouth High School Members was 4.062 and the median of their comprehension scores was 8.375. The speed median is in terms of the number of words read per second, which translated into terms of elapsed time lies between 18 and 20 minutes. This was assigned according to the arbitrary scale value of 6.982. In like manner the comprehension median was assigned its arbitrary value of 8.375. These two values were added to obtain the score of 15.357.

An interesting diagnostic chart was made to show the achievements of all the students who took the test. The dark lines were drawn so that below the first horizontal line lay approximately 25 per cent of the students; above it, but below the second horizontal line lay 50 per cent of the students, and above the second horizontal line lay the remaining 25 per cent. In the same way the vertical lines from left to right divided the students into a lower 25 per cent, a medium 50 per cent, and a higher 25 per cent. The order of

progression was obviously from the lower left-hand rectangle through the central to that in the upper right-hand corner.

We prepared diagnostic charts for such high schools as desired them. These charts were made from the original one by allowing the dark lines to remain, but removing all the dots except those representing the numbers of the school in question. We find that one student had an excellent score, 13 had medium scores, and that there were no students of marked inferiority.

COMPREHENSION

| SPEED | Minutes | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | 0-12 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9 | 12-14 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8 | 14-16 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 | 16-18 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6 | 18-20 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5 | 20-22 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | 22-24 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | 24-26 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | 26-28 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 28-30 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 | More than 30 | | | | | | | | | | | |

DIAGNOSTIC CHART

## III

## OBJECTIONS

It remains to answer possible questions which might be asked.

I. How do you know that the time limit was accurate?

We do not know that it was. Indeed we are quite sure that half an hour was a longer time than should have been allowed, since several students finished before the cards were being held up and so had inaccurate records.

II. Wouldn't a passage from a novel so well known as *Kenilworth,* be familiar to some students?

Undoubtedly it was familiar to some. Statistics, however, show that familiarity with a passage gained during the ordinary reading in school will not appreciably affect the tests unless the reading has been done very recently, say within a month preceding the test.

III. Why not have the thought reproduced in the form of a written paragraph?

We used the examination scheme because we felt by that method we could get greater accuracy in the grading. Ideally the comprehension should be tested by having each pupil state orally in his own words what he has read, and by having a stenographic report of his statements. This method is not feasible because of the time and expense factors which are involved.

## IV

### CORRELATION

We were interested in determining the relationship between speed and comprehension. A careful survey and tabulating of our figures led us to the conclusion that generally the rapid reader is also the more intelligent reader. We found, however, some cases of students who were slow and painstaking in the reading, but who graded 100% in comprehension; we had other students, who read rapidly and at the same time superficially, as was found by their comprehension tests. These cases were exceptions and few in number.

The student who graded highest in speed, ranked 100% in comprehension and gave evidence of rather unusual ability in the English work. The student who took three-quarters of an hour for the reading, failed to pass and was put back into a repeating section.

## V

### REMEDIAL MEASURES

The logical question which one asks at this point is: Having "spotted" the slow or superficial reader, what are you going to do about it? A very pertinent question and a difficult one for a college instructor to answer. It is true that the development of methods and devices which are remedial have not kept pace with the tests and diagnostic charts. We feel, too, that so many measures which might be effective for

younger girls and boys would be wasted effort for college men and women. Training in quick perception, vocalization, broadening of the perceptual span and study of phonics, which are valuable in themselves, do not belong in college work.

Dr. C. A. Cockayne of the Springfield Technical High School sounds a hopeful note in the *English Leaflet* for April, 1922. He quotes the record of a Senior High School class reading Macaulay's *Life of Johnson.* The average number of words read by the class in the first reading was 319; on the last reading it was 640 words. This shows an average improvement for the class of 100% in nine readings.

Dr. Cockayne goes on to say that in the case of a student reading Macaulay for both speed and comprehension, as his speed increased his comprehension improved. To quote:

"Grasp of thought improves with speed because of the higher degree of concentration with which the mind works. When a speed is reached that gives the student 100% of the thought, the maximum efficiency has been attained. Increase in speed beyond that point would likely result in loss of comprehension."

And so we have courage to go on next year in an attempt to gain both speed and comprehension by the use of "practice periods." For information concerning the work in "practice periods" we are indebted to Mr. C. R. Stone, Principal of the Gardenville, St. Louis, School. Indeed, it was his article in the September Number of the *Journal of Educational Research* which furnished the stimulus for our work in silent reading.

The "practice period" is just what its name implies, a period during which the student reads silently, scoring himself at the end.

Mr. Stone makes the following suggestions:

1. Practice one period between two recitations.
2. Read as much as you can and at the same time comprehend well enough to summarize the main points.
3. Use the same amount of time for each practice period.
4. Omit unusual passages such as fine print, list of figures or tables.
5. Do not review the reading before making the record.

BELOW IS A SAMPLE RECORD BLANK

| *Date* | *Time* | *Place* | *Number lines read* | *Main topic cov'd* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

The following five factors are cited as bearing directly upon successful silent reading:

1. Proper physical conditions.
   a. Bodily.
   b. Environmental.
2. Freedom from lip movement.
3. Conscious striving to read rapidly.
4. Long well-controlled eye moments.
5. Ability to perceive meanings at a glance.

The first four factors hardly need comment; the fifth involving as it does, vocabulary and breadth of reading, is the concern especially of the high school and the college teacher. A comprehensive discussion of these two interesting and vital elements would, however, belong in other papers.

We would emphasize in closing the three conclusions which Mr. Stone reaches:

1. The silent reading ability of college students may be improved.
2. The limits of silent reading ability are not known.
3. Silent reading is a very fertile field for investigation.

# MAXIMUM AND MINIMUM LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

MORRIS B. SANFORD
Holyoke High School

Some time ago a teacher came to me, bringing with him two bright girls. "These pupils," said he, "are not doing their best work. They are clever enough so that they can master their lessons with one-third of the effort that others make. Then they idle away their time. How can we induce them to give us their best?"

This is a specific example of one of the really big problems of the public school. What are we to do with the pupil who possesses more than average ability, and what are we to do with the pupil who possesses less than average ability? Because we have been able to demonstrate that an actual saving in dollars and cents results from putting the retarded boy into a special class, thus preventing him from becoming a special charge to the school and to the community, the problem of the duller pupil is in a way of being fairly well solved. But while we have taken care of the unpromising boy or girl, how many schools have attempted to do anything for the superior student, except in an occasional, haphazard manner? If we count the schools that are really trying to give different work for the more intelligent pupils, we shall find such institutions are very few. Perhaps one important reason lies in the fact that, while the teacher is annoyed by the presence in the class of a sub-normal child and presses for his removal, he is not at all concerned because he has a pupil who can do much better than the others. Thus, since the superior pupils do not demand attention as do the inferior ones, they do not receive the consideration that is rightly theirs.

It has been urged by many that segregation of the more able pupils is the best way to meet this problem. Objectors to this method have urged that this arrangement is unnatural and that the average pupil needs the inspiration of the superior pupil. However this may be, there is one further objection to this plan: most schools are too small to segregate to advantage. The students are already separated into college courses, commercial courses, and vocational courses. Within these groups there cannot be found a sufficient number of boys and girls to form separate classes.

What, then, remains to us? Must we abandon our idea

of giving special attention to those children who will best repay such effort? On the contrary; one other way remains. We can give maximum and minimum assignments instead of the rigid, inflexible ones, to which most of us have become accustomed.

What are these maximum and minimum assignments, and how may they be given? There are many different methods of doing this. The teacher, instead of saying, "Tomorrow each member of the class will write any two of the brief business letters in Exercise A on page 135," will say, "Tomorrow each member of the class will write some of the brief business letters in Exercise A on page 135. The minimum assignment is two letters. Do as many as you can do well." Such maximum and minimum assignments are very easy in commercial correspondence. They are just as easy to make in grammar. Instead of asking the pupil to analyze five sentences, a teacher may ask for a minimum of ten original sentences to illustrate a principle, instead of asking for ten only. But what can the teacher do in literature? If the "Sir Roger de Coverley Papers" or the "Sketch Book" is being studied, give for the maximum assignment essays not read in class and some modern essays. Anything assigned, however, which is not in the text book, must be most accessible to the student. If poetry is being studied, extra poems may be read and extra lines may be memorized.

But, will the pupil do this extra work? The teacher who tries the experiment will find, much to his surprise, that the response will be almost universal. The average number doing more than the minimum work will vary from two-thirds of the class to almost the entire class. It will even be found necessary to restrain some of the over conscientious ones. In one small class of pupils, who have failed in the first half of Fourth Year English at Holyoke High School, at least three students have found enough incentive in the latitude given them by the system of maximum and minimum assignments to do a year's work in half a year and avoid the searing influence of failure to graduate with their class. And not only are these supposedly inferior ones doing a year's work in half a year, but they are doing it well. In another class which is studying "Julius Caesar," pupils have memorized from thirty-five to one hundred and fifty extra lines, according to the ability of the student. The superior pupils are doing more work and are doing it willingly.

And is not that a correct principle? The intelligence tests have shown us that quanitity is of some value as well as quality. Our examinations in the past have measured only quality, whereas the intelligence tests have measured both quality and quantity. Is the quantity of a man's work an entirely negligible factor?

This brings us to one of the chief dangers of the system of maximum assignments, the sacrifice of quality to quantity. Teachers may find it necessary at times to warn the boys and girls against doing so much that they do all poorly. If this point is insisted upon, there need be no lowering of the standard of work done; on the contrary, better work will be done because the more one does, the better he learns how to do. Furthermore, interest is always keener when the work is sufficient to earn the pupil's respect and call forth all his powers.

But can a teacher take care of all this extra work? The class period is short, and would not discussion of maximum assignments take up too much time? Of course, the minimum assignments will be considered of first importance, but the skillful teacher will easily find a method for taking up the maximum assignment, also. If the latter consists of extra reading, this may be used as a basis of comparison for class discussion. If extra composition work has been done, that is handed in by the pupil and corrected by the teacher. Usually, however, the maximum and the minimum lessons are so closely woven together that they cannot be separated in class discussion; therefore both are completed together without any trouble. Sometimes, when the lesson is long, the teacher may keep track of the work done for extra credit by asking the pupil to hand in a record of what he has accomplished in addition to the minimum required. Again, he can check up this work when he gives a test by including an extra question based on the maximum assignments. But suppose a teacher does not have the time to quiz the pupils on every angle of the extra work done, he has a record of it and knows that it has been done in most cases. Is not that a very great gain indeed? Nevertheless, this should not be made to serve as an excuse whereby a teacher may neglect to pay proper attention to the maximum assignments.

But does not this involve extra work on the part of the instructor? It certainly does, and for this reason it will not be used by those who are accustomed to follow the path of

least resistance. It will be used only by the teacher who is willing to plan his work more carefully than others. Extra work that is definite must be laid out for each day. If a pupil is told to do a certain amount of reading during a week, he will not do it. If he is referred to rather indefinite sources of information, he will do little. He must have a definite number of pages from a definite source each day. The teacher who can and will put forth this extra effort will find ample reward in watching the increased development of his superior pupils.

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